

Anne Hutchinson

Dates:

Born: July, 1591 in Alford, England

Died: September, 1643

Immigrated to Massachusetts: 1634

Banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony: 1637

Biography:

Anne Hutchinson was an important figure in the early history of American Christianity. She challenged many of the prevailing ideas of the Puritan leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and, because of that, would become a symbol both for religious dissenters and for women in America.

Anne Hutchinson and her husband, William, emigrated from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony because they were committed members of a Puritan group which was having trouble with the authorities. Soon after her arrival, she began to hold religious meetings in her home - originally just with very small groups of a few women, but soon her keen insight on theological matters was recognized and, according to John Winthrop, she was soon leading meetings of "threescore or fourscore persons," including ministers and magistrates.

According to Hutchinson and to Puritans, human activity could not help one achieve salvation. However, where Hutchinson differed from the other Puritans is that she believed personal behavior could be used as a clue about whether or not a person was saved. According to Hutchinson, God's grace was implanted in every human soul. This, however, challenged the very basis for the Puritan colony, a society based upon the principle of moral striving. If Hutchinson was right, what was the purpose of the colony?

Her beliefs also came very close to endorsing Antinomianism, the idea that Christians do not have to follow any laws because they are filled with God's grace and, hence, cannot do any wrong:

As I do understand it, laws, commands, rules and edicts are for those who have not the light which makes plain the pathway. He who has God's grace in his heart cannot go astray.

Finally, there was the fact that she was a woman presuming to teach men - something which Puritans believed was forbidden in the Bible. As a consequence of this and all of the above, she was charged with heresy and questioned before a tribunal - but, unfortunately for them, she was more knowledgeable than they and was very able to counter every argument and accusation.

Finally, she gave up trying to defend herself on legal grounds and began to tell about revelations she had received directly from God - even saying that her persecution was foretold and that something would happen to the colony as a result. This gave the tribunal an easy excuse to condemn her and sentence her to be banished.

She first moved to Rhode Island, the destination of many religious dissenters, but after her husband died in 1642 she went on to Long Island with her ten children. There all were killed in a raid made by native Indians, an event which was proof for many that she was a heretic.